

Historical Relics of Cefn Sidan



"The sands extended to Kidwelli; every Winter covered with wrecks; the losses of life and valuable cargoes was something terrible, and Carmarthen Bay was the scene of fearful wrecks and human suffering from the treacherous Cefn Sidan Sands extended miles out to sea; and at low water appeared like an immense desert of sand, upon miles and miles of which were to be seen melancholy mementoes of wrecked ships, their bleached and rotted timbers and ribs just obtruding above the sands near by the spot where perished the unfortunate mariners on those wild exposed wastes of sand"

Evidence of the vast volume of sea traffic which passed along our shore is now limited to the "bleached and rotted timbers" protruding from its sands towards the northern end of the beach. The anchors displayed at the main beach access are also medallions of Cefn Sidan's maritime history.



Shipping, for many years the most effective method of transportation, was the key influence in the development of coastal areas such as Kidwelli, Pembrey and Llanelli. We know the sea was vital for supply and communication with the Roman forts of Carmarthen and Loughor. Following the Norman invasion, Carmarthen again became an important "shipping place". Documents of 1287 show passage of goods to and from landing stages in Laugharne, St Clears, Llanelli, Penclawdd and Loughor. In the early 13th century, a licence was granted to "Robert of Kidwelli", a shipmaster to trade with Gascony.

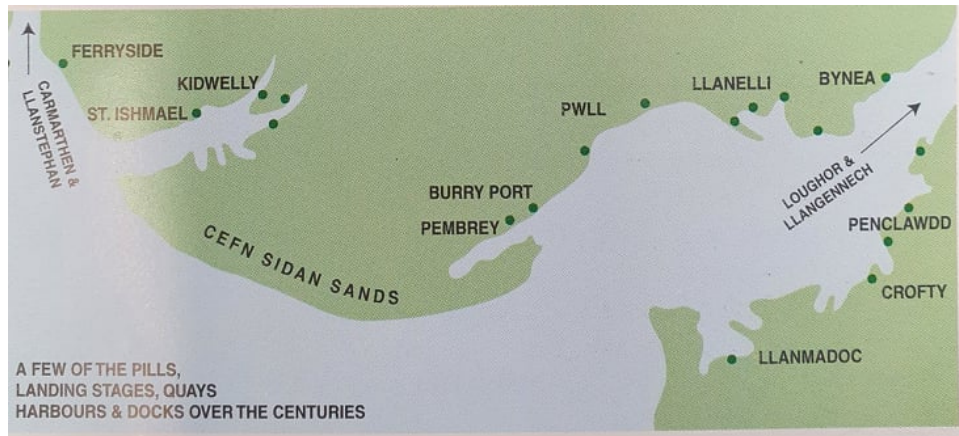
A snippet from 1644 tells of a vessel conveying ammunition to Tenby during the Civil War - "beleaguered by the parliamentarians, she was chased by a frigate, but escaped to a creek in Llanelli"

The quays and landing stages of the "North Gower Pillls" such as Penclawdd and Llanmadoc are well recorded for the supply of limestone, but it was coal, the "Black Gold" of South Wales, which played a major part in the development of the areas shipping. Leland's "Itinerary" of 1540 explains, "At Llanellble, a village of Kidwelli Lordship, the inhabitants dig coles"

As methods of coal extraction improved, so production increased, forcing the landing stages of the creeks and pills to be replaced by Quays, Harbours and Docks. These also serviced the massive growth in the areas metal processing industries. Kidwelli Docks in 1766, Llanelli Docks 1779, Pembrey Harbour 1819 and New Pembrey Harbour (Burry Port) 1836 are testimony to an era of escalating development. Tonnage increases are vividly shown in the following Llanelli Dock records

1831 - 816 vessels taking 53,884 tons

1868 - 2,266 vessels taking 206,693 tons



Due to the vast amount of siltation which occurred, locals and visitors alike are today puzzled to think how ports at either end of Cefn Sidan could ever have been of any consequence. Pembrey, a tidal harbour at one time, had tramways and canals leading to it, but has now become saltmarsh. Kidwelly, or Kymer's Quay, was able to accept vessels drawing up to 18 feet with ease in 1797. As far as vessels were concerned, Cefn Sidan has been known as "the dustbin of the Atlantic", and over the centuries, has been willing to accept any vessel onto its shores. Not only the coasting and short-sea commerce vessels of the area, but also many ocean going vessels associated with exotic trades and passages.

Of the 182 recorded vessels wrecked on Cefn Sidan since 1668, the following list depicts a variety of cargoes and passages

1810. The "Union". Sailing from Cadiz to London. Cargo of Indigo, Copper and Cochineal. 14 lives lost.

1816. The "William". Sailing from Newfoundland to Bristol. Cargo of Seal skins and oil.

1818. "La Providence". Sailing from Bordeaux to Dunkirk. Cargo of Juniper berries, Wine, Brandy and Coffee. Many local people were found on the beach by the authorities, totally inebriated. One man died due his severe intoxication.

1828. "La Jeune Emma". Sailing from Martinique to Le Havre with Rum, Sugar and coffee. 13 lives lost including Lieutenant Col. Coquelin and his daughter Adeline, niece of Josephine, consort of Napoleon Bonaparte.

1833. The "Brothers". Sailing from Bahia to Liverpool. Cargo of Buffalo Hides and Cotton. 15 lives lost.

More recently and still to be seen are:

1886. The "Teviotdale". Cardiff to Bombay carrying Coal. 17 lives lost.

1925. The "Paul". Halifax in Nova Scotia to St. Anne's Head where she was to be given her final destination. Cargo of Timber.

The last two vessels lost on this beach were,

1980. The "Resolva". A private pleasure yacht making for a sailing festival at Bristol. 4 lives lost.

1996. A yacht with no registered name coming from Morocco to an unknown west coast destination was blown ashore. On board was found many large sealed and watertight packs of cannabis resin with a 'street' value of £800,000.



Over the years, we see Cefn Sidan has had various names for different sections of its shoreline, as well as changing its contours dramatically, but whatever its name or shape, this 8 mile section of beach certainly has a long and rich maritime history. Facing out into Carmarthen Bay, Cefn Sidan has been associated with a group of people known as "Gwyr y Bwelli Bach" - People of the Little Hatchets. This title refers to people of the surrounding hamlets who carried about their person an uniquely designed tomahawk type hatchet – ideal for the plundering of shipwrecks! Their era of most notoriety was between 1770 and 1870. During storm conditions, under cover of darkness, they are said to have lit beacon type bonfires on Pembrey Mountain. They thought this would lure a ship's captain into thinking he had seen a light of a safe haven such as a port or harbour. They hoped the ship would be drawn into the shallows in order to plunder its cargo and rob its crew.

In reality, by the time a ship's captain could have observed a bonfire ashore whilst in storm conditions in the hours of darkness, then the ship was probably already in a desperate plight amongst the shallows, sandbanks and storm waves. A ship's captain would never set course for an unknown light as it is normally used to signify danger. Also, lighting beacons, looting cargo and robbery from crews was far from unique just to this area. The North and South Devon coast, the Cornish coast and West Wales coast were well known for this practice so sea captains would exercise the best of caution in observing a strange light on shore.

Reports of the time indicate sail damage, blown off course and largely navigational error to be the causes of grounding upon this shallow shore. It cannot be denied though, the despicable act of looting and plundering did take place. Cargo, sails, ropes, ships furniture, instruments and tools would be taken. Possessions of crew and passengers, whether dead or alive, would be taken. Items on a body difficult to remove, such as rings, would, with a stroke of the hatchet, result in removal of fingers. It was reported that Adeline, niece to Napoleon Bonaparte's consort, had two of her fingers missing. Reports and correspondence at the time called them "Lladron Glan y Mor"- Robbers of the sea.



Examining records and looking at ports of destination, it seems navigational error, sail damage or to be blown off course seem the most likely reasons. Even so, whether deliberately brought onto the sands or not, the result was always the same. With complete disregard to survivors of the wreck, the despicable act of looting and plundering would take place. Nothing of value would be left, Cargo, ships furniture, sails, ropes, ships instruments and tools would all be taken. Even the possessions of crew and passengers, whether dead or alive, would be stolen. Items proving difficult to remove, such as rings, would, by the stroke of a hatchet, result in the removal of fingers.

Reports and correspondence of the time called them “Lladron Glan y Mor” – Robbers of the Sea. An advertisement issued shipping agencies by Llanelli shipping interests in The Cambrian newspaper – 14th March 1818:-

“We are desirous it be known that Kefn Shedan Sands, on which most of the shipwrecks have occurred, do not form any part of the Harbour of Llanelly”

When the “La Providance” grounded, looters from Kidwelli to Pwll swarmed like bees round a honey pot to take advantage of its cargo of wine and brandy.

“Exhibiting the most disgraceful scenes, not less than 2,000 people assembled on the shore plundering all they could get out, breaking in the heads of casks and drinking to such a degree, both male and female, they became extremely intoxicated, one found dead from suffocation and two others missing”.

When the “Die Gute Hoffrung” grounded in 1842 “the vagabond race who prowl the sea shore” stole the Captain and his wife’s belongings and spare clothing.

In 1859 when the “Sir Henry Pottinger” sailing from Peru to Liverpool mistook the light on Caldey for the Tuskar light, four Pembrey people appeared before Llanelly Court charged with “purloining articles” from the ship. (Pembrey at that time was a Parish extending from Kidwelli to Pwll). The ship was carrying Silver bars and Copper Ore valued, at that time, to be worth £25,265.

The re-enforcement of the Militia barracks at Pwll marked the beginning of the end for the looters as regular horse back patrols of the beach took place. In October 1886, 30 men and women were arrested trying to loot the “Teviotdale” whilst 17 bodies of the crew lay on the strandline.



The “Paul”, sailing from Haliac in Nova Scotia to St. Anne’s Head for definitive instructions as to what South Wales port her cargo of timber was destined. Unfortunately, for the last 9 days of her 27 day journey, she had sail after sail torn to shreds by glae force winds. On 30th October, 1925, she drifted helplessly into Carmarthen Bay in thick mist and darkness, settling on her final resting place, now known as Towyn Point. It has been said that many houses in Llansaint and Kidwelly have fine foreign timber within their structure!

Today, the wrecks that remain on Cefn Sidan are difficult to reach. Mostly situated at the northern end of the beach, a walk of around 10 miles would have to be undertaken to see them. Also, the northern end of the beach is closed Monday – Friday, due to the R.A.F. bombing range being in operation. Add to that the treacherous gullies and sandbanks with a tide that can come in quicker than walking pace, it is not advisable to undertake a sight visit.

One wreck, although year by year less of it remains, is just over a mile up the beach from entrance B. It can be seen as long as the tide is over a third of the way out, situated near a stone groin. The anchors on display at the main beach access were found at the extreme low water mark in front of this wreck but there is no proof of any association between them.



A carvel-built ocean-going vessel, aligned N.E to S.W., some parts of it remain to a height of 6ft. What remains of the hull is 164ft. long and it can be seen where a large section of the port side was cut away to facilitate easy removal of cargo. Samples have been taken from 3 of the portside frames for dendrochronological analysis and from recognised chronologies, we estimate the frames to be made of a northern European oak for construction in the mid to late 1800's. Close examination also shows metal fixings, treenails and square-sectioned copper nails.



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